

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

5th September 2021 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

MARK 7:24-37

INSIDERS

Have you ever felt like an outsider? The way that I am defining it here is that you felt completely alone even though you were with other people, perhaps even a crowd of other people, perhaps even with people you know. Have you felt that although you are surrounded by others you are completely alone and cut out of what everyone else is doing and talking about? Maybe it was because you looked different, or had different interests or ideas or beliefs, or possibly because you just didn't share the experiences of the people you were with. And so, while everyone else is happily chatting away, you feel like you are on the outside.

A time when I remember really feeling like that was at a wedding Karen and I went to just a few months after we were married. It was the wedding of a lady Karen had gone to uni with, and Karen was one of the bridesmaids. The only people I knew out of the well over a hundred people there were Karen and the bride and groom, and of course they were all otherwise occupied. I timed it so I arrived at the reception just before it was due to begin, but of course the bridal party were running late with their photos etc, so I was standing there for a long time in a room with a very large group of people, with absolutely no one I felt I could just go up and say, 'Hi' to. This was before mobile phones, let alone smart phones, so I couldn't even hide before my phone like we would probably do today. Being a wedding, everyone else knew other people very well so they were all having a great chat in closed groups, while I remember just standing there feeling like so much of an outsider.

I actually had a really good night at that wedding, which will surprise you after what I have just said. When we finally went into the reception and sat at our tables, I found that the bride had looked after me and made sure I was on a table with people who had similar interests to me, so we

ended up having a good chat and a great night. Thanks to the bride's deliberate care and organisation, I went from feeling like an outsider to an insider.

We can feel like an outsider even in a large crowd of people. We can feel like that at times even with people we know very well. We can feel like an insider even in a small group, or even with just one person. When the connection works, we can feel like an insider even with people or a person we have just met.

Today's Gospel reading from Mark chapter 7 has two stories of people who felt like outsiders, because that's how they were treated, but who Jesus made feel like insiders. The first account is about a Greek woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon. She is an outsider because, quite simply, she is not a Jew. But Jesus has deliberately gone to an area where most people weren't Jewish, and so His meeting her would have been no surprise to Him. When she first speaks to Him there is a little exchange which seems like Jesus is insulting her, but to me is Him just really pulling out of her the response of faith and humility He knew she was going to give. It was her faith in what Jesus both could and would do for her daughter which saw Jesus perform this healing. Simply by His words, Jesus changed her from feeling like an outsider, to knowing that she was an insider.

The second half of this reading is about Jesus coming across a man who was deaf. Remember that in another Gospel story, where Jesus heals a man who was born blind, Jesus was asked, 'who sinned that this man was born blind, him or his parents?' Among God's people at this time, any type of physical disability was seen as the result of sin, which made one unclean, and therefore, an outsider. In this case, Jesus takes the man aside, and by His touch He heals him. What is important for us is that Jesus not only physically healed this man, but in doing so He made Him clean. Again, the man's encounter with Jesus changed him from feeling like an outsider, to knowing that he was an insider.

By His words, and His touch, Jesus showed both of these people, and many others, that He had come for them. He showed them that through Him they could experience God's love and be a part of God's kingdom. They could now be sure that through Jesus, they were insiders.

It's very easy for us to be hard on the Pharisees and others in these stories for what we might see as their racism or bigotry in how they treated anyone who didn't fit in with how they thought everyone should be. But if we just focus on them, we miss the teaching which is here for us. We also judge people, it's a part of our nature, both what we are born with and what we learn. Often without thinking about it we make judgements about who we want to talk to, who we want to include, who we want to listen to because their opinions will be like ours. We normally won't be as upfront as the Pharisees and name people publicly as being unclean, but in other, more subtle ways, we can make them feel that they are not really a part of what we are trying to form in any group.

It's not always easy for us to include others, in any of our groups, including in our church family who come together for worship and other activities. But that is another part of the call to discipleship which Jesus gives to each one of us. As those who have faith, which is what defines a Christian community of any size, we already have that common ground on which we can come together and which forms the basis of a new relationship. Through Jesus, through His words and His touch, we know that we are each a part of His family.

Our call then is to, like Jesus did, go out and make sure that everyone knows they are insiders, which begins with making sure they know they are a part of the wider Christian family, and again of our own local groups. God wants us to do all we can to make everyone feel like an insider; that they belong, that they are supported, that God's love is for them because that is what we show them. We can feel like we do that pretty well, and generally we do, but not everyone is going to feel that all the time. That can be a two-way thing, but like we sometimes teach our children, we can't change others, only ourselves. It also doesn't help when we just look at what others are doing or are not doing and make judgements about them. This is all about self-reflection and self-examination. We need to always be aware of and sensitive to people who may be a part of any Christian community

they are with, but who don't feel like insiders in that community. What can *I* do to help carry out Jesus' message to everyone I come into contact with, so that they know Jesus is there for them, and that they are a part of His family?

What Jesus does here in both of these healings, is to not just physically heal people, but also to show them that they are a part of His kingdom, that they are people who He came to love, to heal, to forgive. They are clean, they are insiders, simply because they have a humble faith which wants to receive everything He has to give. That's the message each of us receives also. We're not left standing by ourselves in the crowd, but we are feasting around the table receiving all the love God has to give to us. When Jesus died and rose for us, God made sure that we can now all be insiders in His love. And when we know that, He calls us to push ourselves out there so that everyone else who comes to Him can know that too. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

We Are All Insiders

Reflect on what it means to you that you are an insider in God's love and His kingdom.

- Are there any times when this gives you a lot of comfort? Thank God for them.
- Are there any times when you struggle to really believe or accept this? Ask God to help you with this.
- Think about the ways God's Word gives you healing, or His 'touch' comforts you? How do you feel God sharing the certainty of His love with you?

Bringing Others Inside

Even though we may believe that we, and our Christian community/groups, may be good at welcoming and inviting people inside, it is something we can always strive to do better. Not everyone will feel the same way about this as we do.

- How easy do you find it to go and talk with someone you don't know very well? If you struggle with this, pray about it, and maybe even go and talk to someone who seems to find it easy and ask for their advice.
- Can you think of anyone in your current Christian community/group who may not feel included? If so, consider what you can do to help them to feel more like they are inside of your group.
- Remember that through God's love and forgiveness in Jesus, God makes us all insiders. As you thank God for this, consider also what role He has for you in helping others to know this also.

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05.09.2021